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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 002195

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SUBJECT: CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM: PLAYERS AND THEIR POSITIONS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT RICHARD DOWNES,  
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary. The December 2 constitutional referendum is a highly polarized political battle between President Chavez and his extensive base on one side and opposition parties, university demonstrators, Catholic bishops, and important sectors of civil society on the other. President Chavez's continuing high approval ratings are his greatest asset as he tries to frame the referendum as a plebiscite on his leadership. His supporters can also tap enormous state resources in support of the "Yes" campaign. Reform opponents are still badly divided on tactics and a significant percentage of potential "No" voters appear likely to abstain. University demonstrators, as well as the opposition of pro-Chavez party Podemos and former Defense Minister Baduel, may have given referendum opponents more credibility within Chavismo. The Catholic Church, pro-democracy NGOs, and prominent civil society associations are also injecting some new energy in the tired and splintered opposition parties. Nevertheless, Chavez still enjoys considerable electoral advantages over his late-arriving, diverse, and poorly organized opponents. End Summary.

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The "Yes" Camp  
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12. (C) Sixteen political parties formally registered with the National Electoral Council (CNE) to advocate for approval of Chavez's proposed sweeping constitutional changes to 69 articles of the 350-article 1999 Constitution. The groups range from Socialist Battalions for The Constitutional Reform to the Communist Party to Patria Para Todos. In reality, the "Yes" camp is personally directed by President Chavez and his inner circle, coordinated by a committee of close supporters and senior officials, and bolstered by government personnel and resources. The "Yes" camp is working for a decisive electoral victory. Local conventional wisdom assumes that Chavez will postpone the referendum if he believes he could potentially lose the vote, as was the case in the recall referendum.

Chavez: With Me or Agin' Me  
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13. (C) Chavez is the protagonist of the December 2 constitutional referendum. He is the person most responsible for the proposed, sweeping changes to 69 articles of the 350-article 1999 Constitution. His continued popularity,

with job approval ratings still hovering above 60%, is the "Yes" camp's greatest electoral asset in the run-up to the referendum. An experienced and effective campaigner, Chavez is already framing the referendum as a vote for or against his leadership, instead of on the substance of his constitutional package. Tellingly, nobody from the "Yes" camp attended the CNE's meeting to organize three televised debates on the actual reform proposal, so the CNE scrubbed the debates. Chavez kicked off the "Yes" campaign with a mass rally November 3 in downtown Caracas, held similar rallies in the states of Maracay, Lara, and Anzoategui, and is slated to travel to other states to mobilize "Yes" votes.

¶4. (C) The Venezuelan president sometimes takes his domestic political strength for granted and focuses disproportionate time and energy on his enormous foreign policy ambitions. Chavez attended the Ibero-American Summit November 8-10 and is traveling to Saudi Arabia this week to attend an OPEC Summit. He also plans to visit Iran, France, and Portugal on the same trip.

¶5. (C) Chavez can also be his own worst enemy. He often overreacts when he feels domestic political pressure. He is lashing out, for example, at university students demonstrating for a postponement of the constitutional referendum, openly questioning the issuance of demonstration permits and urging state security forces to apply a "firm hand" against students. An intemperate reaction to the vigorous "No" challenge could play a role in determining turn-out on December 2. It remains to be seen what that reaction would be.

The Zamora Command: Machine Politics  
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¶6. (SBU) President Chavez selected a number of senior BRV leaders to lead his Zamora Command "Yes" election campaign,

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named after 19th century Venezuelan land reform proponent and general Ezequial Zamora. Vice President Jorge Rodriguez, Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro, Miranda State Governor Diosdado Cabello, Telesur President Andres Izarra, Information Minister William Lara, Information Vice Minister Helena Salcedo, and National Assembly Deputies Dario Vivas, Gabriela Ramirez, and Carlos Escarra make up the Zamora Command's leadership. Escarra has been one of the BRV's principal intellectual proponents and defenders of the proposed constitutional reform. This central "Yes" campaign committee will direct the efforts of similar state and local "Yes" campaign committees.

¶7. (C) Chavez's "Yes" campaign team will almost certainly rely heavily on Chavez's proposed United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), much as previous Chavez campaigns relied on his Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) party. PSUV formation leaders claim the party signed up 5.6 million members and retains the active participation of 1.2 million members (out of an electorate of over 16 million registered voters). While those numbers are probably inflated, and the PSUV has been plagued by poor organization and intra-party rivalries, PSUV battalions offer a far bigger, functional party base than the collective bases of opposition parties combined. Moreover, Chavez's blurring of the distinction between state and party will likely provide PSUV "Yes" campaign workers with significant resources and free air time on government stations. PPT leaders tell us the BRV is already putting pressure on government employees (over two million voters) to vote "Yes" or risk losing their jobs.

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The "No" Camps  
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¶8. (C) Nineteen political parties formally registered with the CNE to oppose Chavez' proposed constitutional reforms.

They include former consensus opposition presidential candidate Manuel Rosales' Un Nuevo Tiempo (UNT) party, Primero Justicia (PJ), Movement Toward Socialism (MAS), La Causa R, the two parties that dominated Venezuelan politics before Chavez was elected in 1999 -- Accion Democratica (AD) and the Christian Democrats (COPEI), and the small pro-Chavez party Podemos. In addition, important sectors of civil society, university students, the Catholic Church, professional and trade associations, and NGOs are actively opposing Chavez' proposed constitutional package. Opposition from former Defense Minister Raul Isias Baduel has given "No" voters a boost. Unlike Chavez's "Yes" campaign, however, constitutional reform opponents present a divided message ranging from seeking postponement, voting "No", to forcing the cancellation of the referendum through a campaign of "civic resistance."

#### University Students: Postpone Until February

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¶9. (C) University students opposed to Chavez' constitutional reforms represent the freshest and probably most important factor working against the Venezuelan government. Local polls show that the student movement enjoys a high degree of credibility among the Venezuelan electorate across the social spectrum. Opposition students have organized three large and generally peaceful marches in recent weeks to the National Assembly, CNE, and the Supreme Court. Overreaction from state security forces and goon violence from Chavez supporters has played to the students' advantage and the BRV's disadvantage so far. A PSUV-organized student march on the Supreme Court November 14 failed to generate a large crowd. At the same time, opposition students are a politically diverse group, and in the interest of fostering unity, have merely sought postponement of the referendum until February. The inter-university student parliament next meets November 17. Student leader Stalin Gonzalez told the media November 16 that he will press the student movement shift its position to endorse voting "No."

#### Mainstream Opposition Parties: Vote No

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¶10. (C) Mainstream opposition parties like UNT, Primero Justicia, MAS, La Causa R, and COPEI form a loose coalition of parties trying to mobilize "No" voters. However, few Venezuelans actually identify with opposition parties. They lack defined political platforms, and they have only recently made efforts to rebuild their party bases and reach out to Venezuela's poor. They are also resource strapped following

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repeated electoral setbacks. These parties organized a November 10 Caracas rally that failed to generate a significant show of support, despite some student participation. Leaders from the aforementioned parties tell us privately that they are having trouble energizing many of their rank-and-file members to work for the "No" campaign.

#### Hard-line Opposition Parties: Stop the Referendum

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¶11. (C) Hard-line opposition parties like AD, Alianza Bravo Pueblo (ABP), and the National Resistance Command (CNR) are leading what they call a "civic resistance" campaign to try to force the BRV to cancel the December 2 referendum. These parties advocated abstention in the last two national elections to avoid "legitimizing" the Chavez government and have so far refrained from urging their supporters to vote "No" rather than stay at home. These groups organized a sizable Caracas rally November 3 and are planning a November 26 rally in Caracas provocatively called "The March of No Return." Despite their bravado, these groups do not appear to have the street power to force the BRV to suspend or cancel the constitutional referendum, but they may help persuade a sizable percentage of potential "No" voters to

abstain. Constitutional lawyer Hermann Escarra (brother of "Yes" campaign leader Carlos Escarra) has emerged as a popular, media-savvy spokesman for this group.

#### The Podemos/Baduel Factors: Credibility Within Chavismo

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¶12. (C) The pro-Chavez party Podemos formally registered with the "No" bloc and is working to mobilize pro-Chavez "No" voters. Podemos governors in two states (Aragua and Sucre) are in a position to be particularly helpful to the "No" cause. In addition, former Defense Minister Baduel held a dramatic November 5 press conference to urge Venezuelans to vote "No." Since then, he has reiterated his position in the media and attended constitution reform fora. The opposition from Podemos and Baduel carries credibility within Chavismo in a way that opposition from the traditional political parties does not. They could potentially influence some pro-Chavez voters to stay home or even vote "No."

#### The Catholic Church: The Reform Is "Morally Unacceptable"

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¶13. (C) The Venezuelan Conference of Catholic Bishops (CEV) issued an October 19 exhortation that sharply criticized Chavez's proposed constitutional changes, calling them "morally unacceptable." They stopped short, however, of explicitly urging parishioners to vote "No". CEV First Vice President Archbishop Roberto Luckert began publicly urging Venezuelans to vote "No" on November 14, however. We understand many parish priests are echoing the bishops' position in their Sunday homilies in parishes nationwide, but regular Mass attendance in Venezuela is not high. Datanalysis Director Luis Vicente Leon told poloffs that, "in the same way young Venezuelan men love their mothers and girlfriends, but do not expect them to get along," he believes many Venezuelan voters simply tune out the Church/state divide while maintaining respect for both Chavez and Church leaders.

#### NGOs: Education Campaigns

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¶14. (C) A number of prominent civil society NGOs, such as Sumate, Ciudadania Activa, and Sinergia, are engaged in extensive public education efforts to promote broader debate of the potential anti-democratic consequences of Chavez's constitutional package. These NGOs are organizing fora, distributing easy-to-read pamphlets, and raising public awareness through media advertising. Their efforts are particularly focused on Venezuela's low income voters, Chavez's traditional electoral majority. These public education efforts generally sidestep the issue of whether Venezuelans should vote "No" or not, although they implicitly activate the "No" position by reinforcing informed democratic participation.

#### Professional Associations: Impede the Reform

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¶15. (C) Numerous professional and trade associations have issued public declarations against the constitutional referendum, but have generally sidestepped the opposition

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debate of whether to vote "No" or abstain. Leaders of Fedecamaras, Venezuela's premier umbrella business association, outlined the organization's opposition to Chavez's reform package in a November 2 press conference and called on Venezuelans to "come out against the reform, rejecting it, denying it, and impeding its approval." A coalition of local bar associations is seeking a postponement of the referendum at the Supreme Court. Venezuela's largest, but relatively weak, opposition trade federation, the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers, called on Venezuelan workers to help "stop" Chavez's proposed reforms. Such

efforts give reform opponents the appearance of some momentum, but it is not likely that their declarations will have much influence on Chavez's political base.

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The Fifth Estate  
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¶16. (C) Government-run media outlets are affording the "Yes" camp plenty of free air time. Chavez may also make use of mandatory "cadena" broadcasts on all free TV and radio airwaves in the coming weeks as he has done before previous elections. The few remaining important independent media outlets are hewing closely to CNE regulations and avoiding openly coming out in opposition to Chavez's constitutional reform package. Venevision, which after the government closure of RCTV, enjoys a 40% television market share, has been particularly circumspect, giving minimal coverage to student protests. Cable TV news station Globovision has been the noteworthy exception, giving ample coverage to "No" rallies, demonstrations, and campaign leaders.

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Comment  
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¶17. (C) Despite intense political polarization in Venezuela and increased media attention on the December 2 constitutional referendum, the "Yes" and "No" camps are both fighting flank battles against voter apathy. Activists on both sides concede that unlike last year's presidential campaign or the 2004 recall referendum, they are having a difficult time motivating potential voters. Many voters still tell local pollsters that they are not familiar with Chavez's proposed constitutional package, and many opposition voters do not trust the CNE to run a clean election and prefer to stay home. Against that backdrop, the Chavez well-oiled electoral machine enjoys a distinct advantage over less well-organized, divided, and disparate opposition groups.

¶18. (C) In addition, Chavez's persona plays much better in Venezuela than outside. For example, while the Spanish king's "Why don't you shut up?" rebuke of Chavez during the recent Ibero-American Summit would appear to pose a sharp setback for the Venezuelan president, it may not prove so among lower income Venezuelan voters. Indeed, Chavez appears to be deliberately extending the public spat in an effort to galvanize his base. Many Chavez supporters are attracted to the Venezuelan president's "outsider" reputation and may respond positively to his "standing up" to a monarch from a wealthy European country and former colonial power.

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